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Michigan Forum Highlights Need for State, National Foster Care Reform

Michigan children, families and judges on the frontlines of foster care endorse recommendations of national, nonpartisan Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care to improve the lives of children in foster care

Monday, November 21, Midland, MI – One day before Michigan's third annual Adoption Day, leading Michigan and national child welfare organizations – including the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC), the Michigan State Court Administrative Office and the Michigan Department of Human Services - convened a panel discussion of Michigan's child welfare system. Held in Midland, the forum featured U.S. Representative Dave Camp (R-MI), Michigan Supreme Court Justice Maura Corrigan, Bethany Christian Services President Glenn De Mots, Deputy Director of Children's Services for the Michigan Department of Human Services Jim Hennessey, and Michigan children and families most affected by the state's foster care system.

The forum focused on the recommendations of the national, nonpartisan Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care. The blue-ribbon panel of legislators, child welfare experts, administrators, academics, foster and adoptive parents and former foster youth undertook the first-ever, comprehensive assessment of two key aspects of foster care – federal financing and court oversight. The recommendations focus on what states and courts need to help children have safe, permanent homes, and provide a blueprint for reforming our nation's foster care system. The Pew Commission included two members from Michigan – Bethany President Glenn De Mots and Michigan Supreme Court Justice Maura Corrigan.

"Michigan has made tremendous progress in meeting the needs of our vulnerable children and families, yet there is still much to do," said Maura Corrigan, Michigan Supreme Court Justice and Pew Commission member. "The Pew Commission's recommendations provide guidance on how to improve the lives of, and outcomes for, children in foster care by giving states, including Michigan, a flexible, reliable source of federal funding, as well as new options and incentives to seek safety and permanence for children in foster care. They call for greater accountability by, and collaboration between, child welfare agencies and courts. And they help courts secure the tools and information to make the best possible decisions for the foster children in their care."

The difference the Pew Commission recommendations could make for vulnerable children and families in Michigan were powerfully illustrated at the forum by panelists on the frontlines of the state's foster care system. They included:

- **Jessica Lindsey**, a young woman who spent years in foster care, moving from one group home to another. **"When they told me I was going to a new facility," she recalls. "I was like, okay, another placement. I had given up on everything. If someone would have asked me and talked to me, they would have found out what was wrong."**
- **Mark and Judy Bash**, foster parents who were unable to adopt their seriously ill foster daughter before her death. Shelly's adoption was delayed because of concerns regarding their ability to obtain health coverage for their daughter who was born with a congenital heart defect. **"Even though we had Shelley for eight and a half years, and everyone knew she was our daughter, every once in a while we still hear, 'Well she was only your foster daughter.' No! She was more than that!"**
- **Vernard Jones**, an adoptive father of a son from foster care with significant special needs. **While he receives a monthly subsidy to pay for the supports and services for his son, Vernard**

spends significantly more than this amount to address his son's special needs, and sees the need for skilled mental health and respite care services. "I knew accepting even a minimum amount of subsidy would be in Alex's best interest."

- **Alanda Reid**, a birth mother who overcame her drug addiction to successfully parent her children. She praises the workers and court staff who helped her reunite with her children. "God sent special people to me – the CPS worker and the foster care worker and the judges....They helped us all the way, and I needed help. To get my self-esteem up and to know that I can try to do things on my own to take care of my children."
- **Judge Michael Anderegg**, Presiding Judge of the Marquette County Probate Court, whose 29 years of experience demonstrate that system reforms can help court personnel better serve the vulnerable children and families in their care. "Thirty years ago across the nation, almost a quarter of children were in foster care for more than seven years, a third had not had their case reviewed in three to ten years, and half had no contact with their biological family.... Since then, the court system has worked to train judges, attorneys and social workers about children's need for stability and permanence."

The panelists' experiences demonstrate the importance of permanent families for children, the need for services and supports for families to prevent children from ever entering foster care, or to help children once they leave foster care for a safe, permanent home, the need to give children in foster care a voice in the process, so that the best possible decisions are made on their behalf.

"In order to effect real, lasting change in the foster care system, policymakers, community members -- all of us -- must listen to the voices of those most affected by child welfare," said Joe Kroll, executive director of the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC), one of the organizations that convened the forum.

Congressman Dave Camp of Michigan's fourth district, a national leader in child welfare reform, spoke at the forum and described the impact of the federal child welfare agenda on Michigan.

There are about 17,000 children in foster care in Michigan, and more than 500,000 children in foster care nationally," stated Jim Hennessey, Deputy Director of Children's Services for the Michigan Department of Human Services. "Within each state and across the country, we must work together to improve the lives of these half a million children."

"Children deserve more from our child welfare system than they are getting now," stated Pew Commission Chairman Bill Frenzel (R-MN), a twenty-year veteran of Congress and former Ranking Minority Member of the House Budget Committee. "The Commission's recommendations would give states a flexible and reliable source of federal funding and new incentives, as well as help dependency courts secure the tools, information, and training necessary to fulfill their responsibilities to children."

ABOUT NACAC

Since its founding in 1974 by adoptive parents, the North American Council on Adoptable Children has been dedicated to the mission that every child deserves a permanent family. Through education, support, capacity building, and advocacy, NACAC promotes and supports permanence for children and youth in foster care in the U.S. and Canada. Visit: <http://www.nacac.org> for more information.

For more information about the Pew Commission's report or recommendations, visit: www.pewfostercare.org TO INTERVIEW FORUM PARTICIPANTS PLEASE CONTACT Gina Russo at 202-421-3578 or mediaiq@comcast.net

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